

Exquisite Corpse: A Chronontology of Surrogates

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Most people will encounter *Exquisite Corpse* through its surrogates, including the digital photography and other reproductive media documenting and extending the installation of Rayyane Tabet's work. Long after its conclusion, these surrogates will be used to communicate a record with far greater reach than the exhibition itself ever could. Yet *Exquisite Corpse* is also an exhibition of surrogates. As both a methodology and a method of expression, Tabet explores and incorporates layers of replicas, copies, facsimiles, translations and digitisations in various forms and formats. From charcoal rubbings to foil pressings, from military tents to shipping records, *Exquisite Corpse* tests our understandings of documentation and reproduction, history and memory, power and narrative through surrogates—including their production and relationship to a given source.

Central to this inquiry is the person who produces the surrogate: the agent who generates and transmits the source into a new derivative or descendant. The decisions that person makes impacts how viewers relate to and interpret the surrogate in relation to its originating source. *Exquisite Corpse* is an interrogation of these sources, their surrogates and ontologies; a play on the surrealist drawing game by the same name which begins with a piece of paper folded into succeeding horizontal sections. Each player contributes one layer and folds it back to conceal their drawing, leaving just enough visible for the next player to build on within the following section until the work is complete and the sheet is full. Unfolding it reveals what is known as an exquisite corpse with distinct and identifiable layers of drawings by different individuals: a surreal assemblage produced collaboratively within a single time and space. Channeling this process across time and space, Tabet work contributes new layers that (re)materialise and make visible the previous folds, histories, contexts and persons who impacted the source before him.

We shall follow one of Tabet's sources, a basalt stone, through these layers and folds at moments of construction, destruction, regeneration and replication. Continuity exists across each fold, with leitmotifs across the layers, as our source emerges with new contexts and narratives shaped by those moments and their players. A geological formation becomes a gravestone, an artifact, a treasure, an array of fragments and a contemporary artwork. We will chart what we know about the events and players. But there are gaps, things that cannot be known about the chronology of our source, leaving space for interpretation. Surrogates produced in those layers provide us with some details or clues and have even spawned new surrogates of their own. But they also obscure, depending on the context in which they are created, presented, used or destroyed. Some are all that remain of their sources; some have come to replace them entirely—like the story of Chronos,

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the Greek god of time, who swallowed his own children out of fear they would overthrow him, only to later regurgitate and be replaced by them anyway.

Every chronology brings its own curatorial approach and narrative lens. This one is no different. It charts a gravestone's removal from its original context to become *Seated Figure* (1912), *Seated Figure Disfigured* (c. 1913-1929), *Seated Figure Reconstructed* (1930-1943), fragments (1943-2001), and *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* (c. 2010-present). It also charts many surrogates, including those produced by Rayyane Tabet, mapping out a chronontology—a chronology of surrogates that binds their relationships to each other and to an originary source—that ensues over a relatively tiny period of time.

Our story begins around the 10th century BCE when a basalt stone already million of years old is excavated from a quarry and reshaped to mark a grave at a place called Guzana. That stone would sit preserved underground for three millennia until a group of men digging a new grave uncovered a half-man, half-animal sculpture at a place called Tell Halaf. And with it, the first fold materialised.

Fold 1: 1899, Uncovering at Tell Halaf

Max von Oppenheim was told of the strange sculptures from men at Ibrahim Pasha's tent camp in 1899. His unofficial excavation lasted just three days, but he reserved the site for future exploration with the authorization of the Ottoman Empire. In 1911, von Oppenheim returned with a permit to begin his first official excavation, funded through his family's immense wealth from the banking industry.

In March of the following year workers unearthed the large head of an androgynous figure marking a grave. A massive 6.5-ton tombstone emerged: *Seated Figure* had been excavated. While there was no inscription to indicate who was buried alongside or portrayed by the seated figure, the stone's size suggested they were important. In his field notes, von Oppenheim wrote: "It took hours and days until the great enthroned goddess finally stood before us in all her size. What a joy when it turned out that the stone image was completely intact."

We know this because von Oppenheim took meticulous records and invested heavily in systematically documenting excavations and reproducing the finds, a novelty at the time. He hired specialists to make detailed architectural drawings, photographic plates, film documentation and full plaster cast replicas, including one of *Seated Figure*. What is not always known is the specific maker of a surrogate or its dating. Von Oppenheim employed hundreds of workers during his two official excavations, including photographers Otto Schottne, Robert Paul and Waldemar Titzenthaler, architect Felix Langenegger, filmmaker Oskar Messter, and sculptor Igor von Jakimow. We know von Jakimow produced plaster casts of the finds from the surviving contract for the 1927-1929 dig. He may also have attended in 1911-1913, producing the original cast of *Seated Figure*. This cast is believed to have accompanied von Oppenheim on a short visit

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to Germany in 1913, during which the source and other artifacts were stored in a structure onsite. Von Oppenheim's return became impossible with the outbreak of World War I, and the site was abandoned.

It was not until 1927 that he could resume excavations, this time with the authorisation of the Authorities of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon. By then the structure housing the artifacts had collapsed. Some had been carried off while others were badly damaged, including *Seated Figure*'s anthropomorphic features: the braids, nose and edge of the offering bowl were all gone. At some point between 1913-1927, *Seated Figure* had become *Seated Figure Disfigured*.

With the second dig, new documentation resumed via photographs and films, along with extensive site diagrams. While any surrogates were owned by the collaborator who had made or commissioned them, the Authorities of the French Mandate and *partage* system determined ownership of their sources. Most were destined for Berlin, with the remainder for Aleppo and a few for France. Plaster casting resumed so that each collaborator might, as Tabet wrote, "receive a replica of what they did not own." A cast of our source is believed to have accompanied other replicas and artifacts assigned to Syria, forming the basis of a new National Museum. What is not known is whether such a cast was produced from the original mold of *Seated Figure*, if surviving, or from a new mold of *Seated Figure Disfigured*. The disfigured source was destined for Germany, forming part of von Oppenheim's share.

Fold 2: 1929, Removal to Germany

Once in Berlin, von Jakimow's 1912 cast was (re)united with its source. Von Jakimow used the intact surrogate to derive new features, replacing those gone during the war. *Seated Figure Disfigured* became *Seated Figure Reconstructed*.

Von Oppenheim reserved a prime spot for the treasure on a pedestal at the entrance to his Tell Halaf Museum, which opened in 1930 in a former iron foundry offered by the Technical University of Berlin. Photojournalists Martin Munkacsi and Ernst Gränert were sent to document the exhibition and their images were reprinted as far away as London in the *London Illustrated News*. Von Oppenheim published his own account of the excavation as the Aleppo Museum opened its doors to the public in 1931. The original cast of *Seated Figure* entered the Marburg Religious History Collection the following year.

On the title card and in his writing, von Oppenheim referred to the tombstone as "Enthroned Goddess," calling it his "venus." His staff called it his "bride." Even Agatha Christie noticed his enamourment when visiting with her husband, archaeologist Max Mallowan. During a five-hour tour that left Christie exhausted and disappointed by the "extremely ugly statutes," she documented a pause by von Oppenheim in which he would "say lovingly: 'Ah, my beautiful venus,' and stroke the figure affectionately." Visitors slowed with the outbreak of World War II

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and the bombing in Berlin prompted von Oppenheim's move to Dresden in early September 1943.

Fold 3: November 22-24, 1943, Allied Bombing of Berlin

Sirens began on November 22, 1943, announcing the Allies' arrival and an onset of white phosphorus bombs. The Tell Halaf Museum was hit. Wood and limestone artifacts, plaster casts and molds, photographs, finds lists, excavation records, find journals, architectural renderings, new research and other documentation housed onsite were gone in the blazing fire that followed.

Stored offsite, von Oppenheim's personal photographic archive survived. Basalt artifacts onsite, like von Oppenheim's venus, also survived the heat, but subsequently exploded from the extreme temperature shift when firefighters began dousing the site in cool water. From Dresden, von Oppenheim wrote to the director of the Vorderasiatisches Museum: "How wonderful it would be if all the fragments into which the sculptures have been shattered could be gathered up and taken to the state museums of Berlin and there, eventually, reassembled. But what a horrendous task that would be, given that this collection has been smashed to smithereens. What I want most of all, of course, is to save the great enthroned goddess."

Others shared those hopes. In 1944, a crew of four relocated nine truckloads of fragments to the Pergamon Museum cellars for storage. Further fragmentation occurred during the eight-month removal of the fragments and their ongoing reorganisation over the following years. Meanwhile, Germany itself was also fragmenting—the basalt remains sat in Soviet-occupied East Berlin. Following the bombing of Dresden, von Oppenheim resettled in the West. He died two years later in Landshut, his own grave marked by a replica of the bottom half of his beautiful venus. The gravestone's inscription read: "Here in God rests a man who loved science, the Orient, the desert and Tell Halaf, which he discovered and excavated. Dr. Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Imperial Prime Minister born in Cologne July 15, 1860 died in Landshut November 17, 1946." Back in Berlin, the fragmented source also rested underground.

With *Seated Figure Reconstructed* presumed gone forever, surrogates were all that remained. Yet she, or perhaps her other derivatives, began to receive wider scholarly attention. Preparations for a four-volume Tell Halaf series resumed but held significant gaps without the original records. Publication proceeded with what remained or could be recreated in the years leading up to 1962. Surviving surrogates also accompanied discussions of femininity and venus archetypes in Erich Naumann's *The Great Mother* (1955) and André Parrot's *Assur* (1961). André Malraux curated the 1930 *London Illustrated News* version of von Oppenheim's venus in *Musée Imaginaire* (1952). The footnotes explained the "Déesse de la fertilité" or "Goddess of Fertility" was destroyed in the Allied bombing and survived by its cast at the Aleppo museum. It is unclear whether the 1930 black and white photograph Malraux used features the *Seated Figure Reconstructed* or the original cast of *Seated Figure*, which survives at the Marburg Religious

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History Collection. The source image had been edited to remove any context or background which might aid in the surrogate's identification. In any case, von Oppenheim's venus (or at least her surrogates) had entered popular culture, and her public presentation as a female figure was almost set in stone.

In 1989, the destruction of the Berlin Wall marked the end of Soviet occupation, and German reunification began.

Fold 4: 2001, Reconstruction Begins

With support from von Oppenheim's descendants and Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, the "horrendous task" of reconstructing the Tell Halaf remains began. In total, 300 wooden pallets with 27,000 basalt fragments in an offsite store room in Friedrichshagen awaited the four restorers: Nadja Choldis, Lutz Martin, Stefan Geismeyer, and Kirsten Drüppel. Mineralogists from Technical University of Berlin aided reconstruction through a petrographic study, sorting the basalt fragments by their textural relationships and geographic origin.

The expense of von Oppenheim's systematic documentation had been money well spent. Photographs from his personal archive of 13,000 images and surrogates in pre-1943 publications guided their work, particularly those taken by Otto Schottne during the second excavation. Also crucial were the extensive documentation and diagrams by Felix Langenegger, Karl Müller and Rudolf Naumann in volume 2 of the Tell Halaf series, *Die Bauwerke* (1950). Surrogates were scanned, xeroxed and enlarged to map out where fragments corresponded to their source. At the Marburg Religious History Collection, Geismeyer made a 1:1 cast of the original cast of *Seated Figure* to aid the restorers' work. Back in Syria, German and Syrian archaeologists resumed excavations, enabling further identification of the stones. Von Oppenheim's photo archive began a tour. The National Library in Damascus exhibited digital surrogates of the photos in 2008; a few years later, their sources went on display at the Museum of Photography in Berlin.

By 2010, von Oppenheim's venus was nearly complete: a *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed*. Decisions were made to not smooth over cracks. Her body remained fragmented, with gaps unaccounted for. But her anthropomorphic features were (re)reconstructed using Geismeyer's mold. New plaster busts were also produced. The 1912 surrogate had once again become the source. Afterward, over 2,000 fragments remained, some potentially belonging to *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed*. Olaf M. Teßmer made digital reproductions of *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* and each remaining shard, and 3D scans were taken to document the final result and explore virtual reconstruction. A fifth volume by Choldis and Martin was added to the Tell Halaf series which featured a color photograph of *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* on its cover.

In 2011, the Pergamon Museum celebrated with an exhibition of the reconstructed artifacts, including a row of wooden pallets displaying a selection of basalt fragments. More than 780,000 people visited the 28-week exhibition *Die geretteten Götter aus dem Palast vom Tell Halaf* or

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“The rescued gods from the palace at Tell Halaf.” On its last day, an auction of the 130 photographic reproductions on display raised more than €6,000 for additional restoration. Meanwhile, the third official Tell Halaf excavation was interrupted and the site was (re)abandoned: white phosphorus bombs had begun falling in Syria. The artifacts in Aleppo were evacuated to safe storage.

Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed began a tour in 2014, traveling first to Bonn then to New York City before returning to the store rooms in Friedrichshagen in 2015. Rayyane Tabet moved to Berlin in 2016 to begin a one-year artist residency.

Fold 5: February 17, 2016, A Conversation

Our most recent layer unfolded with a conversation. On February 17, 2016 Tabet met with Cholidis, Martin and Geismeier at the Pergamon Museum to discuss his personal connection to the Tell Halaf artifacts, setting in motion the events, research, and (re)production of works leading to *Exquisite Corpse*. Tabet was given three options to make surrogates: charcoal rubbing, photography or 3D scanning. He opted for the method allowing him to physically engage with the artifacts and their materiality.

We know this because Tabet’s methodology included systematically documenting the production process and workspace in the store rooms in Friedrichshagen. Sitting at a table behind *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* and Geismeier’s bust cast (of the 1912 cast), Tabet folded a piece of paper around each basalt shard and produced 1,000 charcoal rubbings over four days in January 2017. Four months later, Tabet pressed foil against the anthropomorphic features gone in the period between the first and second excavation; the same features reconstructed on both *Seated Figure Reconstructed* and *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed*. As his source, Tabet used the second bust cast produced from Geisner’s mold of the original cast of *Seated Figure*.

The exhibition of Tabet’s *Basalt Shards* opened in April 2017 as basalt stone was being excavated from the Abu Hassan Quarry in As Suwayda, a place also called Sweida, in southwest Syria. In total, 6.5 tons were cut into tiles and removed to Beirut by land on May 7. Once in Beirut, shipping documents recorded the origin as Lebanon. The basalt tiles departed from the now destroyed Port of Beirut for Rotterdam on June 10, which we know from the shipping documents with an x-ray of the tiles in the shipping container. The basalt tiles united with the foil pressings in Rotterdam on July 21, for the exhibition *Ah, my beautiful Venus!*

In 2018, Tabet’s *venus* began a tour: travelling first to Hamburg to unite with Tabet’s shards for *BRUCHSTÜKE / FRAGMENTS*. Tabet published his own personal account of the exhibition in 2018. Tabet’s book cover was impressed with a surrogate of von Oppenheim’s book cover from 1931. Both works traveled to Beirut, Nîmes, and then Hamburg for storage, as the National Museum in Aleppo reopened to the public in 2019. Meanwhile, *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* traveled to London, then Paris. At the Louvre, Tabet’s *Orthostates* entered the exhibition

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narrative of the Tell Halaf artifacts. Later that year, *Seated Figure Re-Reconstructed* entered the exhibition narrative of Tabet's artifacts at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Tabet and the curators reserved a prime spot on a pedestal at the entrance in the Court of Assyrian Reliefs, presented onsite and online as "Seated figure."

More than 80 years after von Oppenheim professed "Ah, my beautiful venus," *Exquisite Corpse* opens in Sharjah to include *Basalt Shards*, *Ah, my beautiful venus* and a new, ongoing work *Digital Surrogates*. Tabet's newest surrogate is a website; an archive of his own surrogates, extensive documentation and photographs of his works and research across this most recent layer of the chronontology.

An Unfolding

Today, a plaster cast made in 1912 remains the most accurate source for reading and studying a 10th-century tombstone also excavated in 1912, a figure that no longer exists in its "original" form. What we know about the tombstone's histories has been reconstructed through surviving documentation, research, and surrogates—even reconstructed *as* a surrogate that replaced its original source.

In the years since her (re)reconstruction, von Oppenheim's venus has traveled and been reproduced further with new technologies. Her image has been converted into logos, featured in documentaries, shared on Wikipedia, and studied by scholars across many fields. Anyone with internet access can order their own "Replica tomb statue, Tell Halaf" on the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin webshop for €42.50 to receive a 1:10 "cast marble" surrogate by "C. Brandis". Those interested in having an encounter with a surrogate of the source can order "Große sitzende Grabfigur" for €24,272.27 to receive a 1:1 plaster cast replica (though the question remains: a replica of what source?). The internet brings documentation of new exhibitions, research, and even excavations, along with new forms of preservation, archiving and record keeping. A surrogate might (re)appear in seemingly countless locations; each context brings a new reading and interpretation of the work. These encounters are preceded by questions of how that surrogate came to be, revealing ongoing dynamics of ownership, possession and access.

Exquisite Corpse explores the ontological status of these surrogates, their sources and production over time. While the viewer encountering a Tell Halaf surrogate might conflate its layers or see through the surrogate to its source, Tabet's surrogates are an unfolding of their shared histories and materialities via a connecting geology, origin, movement and method of production. We encounter Tabet's objects through a lens that both enfolds these layers onto one another and unfolds them to make those relationships apparent. Tabet's venus and basalt shards even come together to replicate its story: an assemblage reconstructed and deconstructed with each installation. His work empowers the viewer to examine the fragmentation and gaps surrounding them. Visitors can move about the wooden pallets, confronted with the task of reconstructing a

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source long gone. They can move about the wooden pedestals, adjusting their physical (and conceptual) perspectives to reconstruct and deconstruct anthropomorphic features long gone. Now anyone with internet access can explore Tabet's digital archive of surrogates, which can travel across borders and in formats impossible for their material sources.

With *Exquisite Corpse*, Rayyane Tabet contributes to a game that does not end. New players will arrive, many will be forgotten. Over time, more sources will be gone, survived only by their surrogates. One day even those will be gone, too. As Tabet shows us, the gaps in that chronontology are what create space for production, regeneration and interpretation in ways our fixation on the original cannot, and never will.

